DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 284 070 CE 047 909

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TITLE Teaching in Prisons: Consideration of the Concept of Adult Education.
PUB DATE May 87
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Conference on Change: Implications for Adult Learning (Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada, May 1987).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; *Adult Education; *Adult Learning; Adults; *Correctional Education; Educational Benefits; *Educational Needs; Literacy Education; *Participant Characteristics; *Prisoners

ABSTRACT

Education within prisons can be viewed as a form of rehabilitation to enable inmates to return to society. However, many prisoners lack fundamental education and have negative attitudes toward learning. This leads to problems in the areas of teaching prisoners and justifying educational programs within prison institutions. Correctional education programs can be justified by the fact that they provide a tie with the outside world that is noncriminal and that they help the prisoner find a job when he or she is released. Prisoners are often lacking in basic skills; come from socially deprived backgrounds; they are often school pushouts/dropouts and have come in conflict with the law at an early age. Prisoners demonstrate a high incidence of illiteracy, low intelligence, learning disabilities, and reading disabilities. It is estimated that the typical inmate functions two or three grade levels below the level completed in school. The best way to meet the education needs of prisoners is to provide adult education conforming to the principles formulated by Knowles (1980). A fundamental consideration in adult education is recognizing and adapting learning to cater to the needs of the learner. This requires educators to present a delivery system that takes into account the wide range of individual differences in age, levels of prior experience, attitudes, interests, and learning styles of a group whose only common denominator is serving time. Applying the concepts of adult education could make correctional education more successful and beneficial to prisoners and society. (KC)

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TEACHING IN PRISONS: CONSIDERATION OF THE CONCEPT OF ADULT EDUCATION

presentation for the Conference:

CHANGE: Implications for Adult Learning

May, 1987

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Abstract

Education within prisons can be viewed as a form of rehabilitation to enable inmates to return to society. However, many prisoners lack fundamental education and have negative attitudes toward learning. This leads to problems in the areas of teaching prisoners and justifying education programs within prison institutions. In this paper, I present relevant literature for the enhancement of education within prisons, and attempt to justify the use of adult education concepts when dealing with prisoners in the educational setting. The paper is divided into five sections. The introduction deals with misconceptions regarding prisoners. Section two justifies education in prisons. Section three presents typical educational characteristics of prisoners. Section four considers the notion of adult education as a baseline necessity in all prison education programs. Finally, section six, the conclusion, rationalizes the necessity for further research in the area of adult education within prison.

Introduction

Many misconceptions prevail in society regarding prisons and prisoners. Although there is no clear understanding as to why the misconceptions prevail, it has been suggested that it may have arisen from the Protestant ethic which aligns itself to the notion of punishment for wrong doing. Some researchers purport that misleading information from the media in the form of sensational newspaper reports, television programs or movies has also contributed to the prevalence of negative attitudes towards prisoners (Dennison, 1979; Forster, 1981; and Education Commission of the States, 1976).

Acknowledging the societal misconceptions of prisoners, the purposes of this paper are to present relevant data as to the characteristics of prisoners, and to justify the need for education within prisons, with particular emphasis on the concept of adult education.

Research presents an abundance of information regarding existing programs within prisons being aligned to academic, remedial and vocational programs (Gold, 1983; Dennison, 1979; McCollum, 1973; Dell'Apa, 1973) however, there is insufficient evidence regarding the concept of adult education. This may be due in part that the study of adult

education is a relatively new dimension in education; emerging as a major educational field of study in the 1970's.

For the purposes of this paper Knowles' (1980) definitions of adult and adult education shall be used. He writes, adult education brings together all individuals, institutions, and associations concerned with the education of adults. An adult is:

> "...a person is adult to the extent that that individual perceives herself or himself to be essentially responsible for his or her own life". (Knowles 1980,p.24)

Justifying Education in Prisons

It is necessary to appreciate the concept of education within prisons as an all encompassing phenomenon. This notion is supported by Forster (1976) who suggests that "education" in the context of prison services can be applied very broadly, and the range of activities it subsumes reaches into every corner of institutional life.

Generally the research on education within prisons claims that prisoners benefit from being involved in education programs. These benefits range from giving the prisoner something to do, thus alleviating the monotony in their daily schedule, to increasing their self-esteem and stimulating confidence (Gold, 1983; Duguid, 1981; and Wylie, 1974). It as been argued that the benefits of education

reduce the social isolation of incarcerated offenders, provides social integration skills for released offenders, and gives prisoners realistic but non-criminal access to the world of work (Wylie, 1974). In addition, Duguid (1981) writes that education can be utilized in the criminal justice system to persuade or enable the criminal to make different decisions in the future, decisions which will not lead to further criminal activity.

How can education programs in prisons be justified? To answer this question, consideration must be paid to the concept of education as a vehicle for rehabilitation (Fox, 1986). Acknowledging that the aim of rehabilitation is to enable prisoners to return to society; it can be argued that the prisoners must be given the necessary knowledge and or skills to accommodate the demands of society. Through numerous educational programs designed to facilitate prisoner needs we are giving prisoners exposure to the skills and/or knowledge necessary to work in the society, and perhaps disassociate from criminal pursuits.

Characteristics of Prisoners

If I were to ask the average man on the street "What is a prisoner?" I am sure many answers would include such adjectives as; rough, evil, selfish and dangerous. The label prisoner holds many connotations which are usually negative in nature. The indoctrination of the Protestant

ethic or, the bias portraying of prisoners in news articles, television programs or movies are the major influences on society's understanding of prisoners. Generally, our impressions of prisoners is that of them being "bad guys".

In order to overcome the existing misconceptions regarding prisoners it is necessary to appreciate the works of those professionals involved with prisoner rehabilitation and development. Professionals in the fields of education, criminology, penology and sociology have all undertaken extensive research as to developing an understanding of the general characteristics or make up of a prisoner. It is this research which indicates that a high percentage of prisoners lack social skills, are usually school drop outs and, proportionally there is a significant high number of prisoners who are illiterate (Dell'Apa, 1973; Dennison, 1979; McCollum, 1973; Gold, 1983; and Duguid, 1981).

McCollum (1973) writes that characteristically the prisoner comes from an economically and socially deprived background, lacks any stable work history, is a school pushout/dropout and has come in conflict with the law at an early age. Furthermore, according to MacCormick (1932) prisoners are undereducated from an academic standpoint and vocationally unskilled. They show a somewhat higher incidence of psychopathic trends and emotional imbalances. Their environmental background is that of the underprivileged groups in our rural and urban communities. A high percentage come originally from broken homes.

Obviously these characteristics paint a somewhat bleak picture of the prisoner. But when one really thinks about it, these characteristics do not differ from some society members in general. The major difference is that a prisoner is incarcerated, the person on the street is 'free'. MacCormick (1932) concludes that when an individual is a prisoner he/she will not think exactly as the person on the street does. However, prisoners are surprisingly like the person on the street in their interests, their needs, their limitations and capabilities.

Educational Characteristics of Prisoners

Research related to the educational characteristics of prisoners cites that many are school drop outs. In addition, prisoners demonstrate high incidences of illiteracy, low intelligence, learning disabilities and reading disabilities (Forster, 1973; Dennison, 1979; Illinois State Advisory Council, 1983; and Gold, 1983). The prisoner population is characterized by gross educational deficiencies. It is estimated that the typical inmate functions two or three grade levels below the level completed in school. The prison population shows a 10-20% incidence of illiteracy. In addition, 25-40% exhibit serious learning disabilities (Illinois State Advisory Council,1983).

In Canada, 40% of federal prisoners are functionally illiterate and of the 12,500 prisoners in federal prisons about 3,200 are taking part in education programs (1986, December. Winnipeg Free Press). The typical educational characteristics of prisoners according to Forster,(1986) include:

1. lack of schooling - either deliberate or by truancy, also behavioural problems in the classroom.

2. very low intelligence - spent considerable time in special schools and have not learned to read.

3. personality problems - some are extremely nervous or withdrawn.

4. short attention span - a few neurotic and/or highly extrovert prisoners are incapable of sitting and concentrating for more than 10 minutes.

5. dyslexia - reading disability.

6. poor long term memory - those who are unintelligent or those with brain damage, especially from alcoholism.

A major problem in prisons is the high incidence of illiteracy. Gold (1983) concludes that the need for literacy training is critical in penal institutions. Illiterate inmates lack the resources that would be afforded them if they could read and write.

In gleaning the research it can be concluded that typically, inmates have completed no more than 10 school grades and function 2-3 grade levels below the level

completed. Many prisoners have major literacy problems which affect their learning abilities. Because of their poor educational history and lack of competencies, they may have a very negative attitude toward any form of educational programs offered to them (Fox, 1986).

Adult Education in Prison

What is adult education? Knowles (1980) writes that adult education can be appreciated from at least three different perspectives. They being:

1. the process of adult learning - encompasses practically all experiences of mature men and women.

2. technical meaning - set of organized activities carried on by a wide variety of institutions for the accomplishment of specific educational abjectives.

3. social practices - working toward the common goals of improving the methods and materials of adult learning, extending the opportunities for adults to learn, and advancing the general level of our culture.

Prisoners are adults with adult characteristics and needs. The characteristics may include chronological age and level of maturity. In addition they perceive themselves as adult, and the roles that they portray in society are aligned with the societal label of them being adult.

Acknowledging the educational needs of adult prisoners, especially in respect of the dominance of illiteracy, coupled with many prisoners having low educational achievement records, the need for recognizing the individual learner arises. Adult education attempts to cater to the needs of individual learners, and is guided by principles that endeavour to facilitate and bring about total involvement in learning. Knowles (1980) lists the principles of adult education as:

* learners feel a need to learn

* the learning environment is comfortable and allows for trust, help, respect, freedom of expression and acceptance of differences.

* learners perceive the learning goals as their own.

* learners share responsibility for planning and operating a learning experience which results in them feeling a commitment toward it.

* learners participate actively in the learning process.

* learning is related to and uses the experiences of the learners.

* learners have a sense of progress toward their goals.

A fundamental consideration in adult education is recognizing and adapting learning to cater to the needs of the learner. For the adult, needs deal with a specific necessity the individual requires in life. Needs can be

associated to adjusting to a personal crisis such as divorce or, enhancing employment status or opportunity. Because prisoners are incarcerated they have special needs. These may include assisting them to adjust to their imprisonment and sentence, aiding them in dealing with their offence, or alleviating the monotony experienced in institutional life. Given the innumerable number of adult prisoner needs the necessity to move toward the principles of adult education in prison educational programs is obvious. This is supported by the 1979 report to the Solicitor General of Canada, concerning educational programs of the Canadian corrections system. Two appropriate recommendations from the report stipulate the necessity for adult education.

Recommendation 4:

> All education and training, whether academic or vocational, carried out within the corrections service, should be conducted in accord with the principles of adult education, allowing for the special characteristics of the inmate population.

Recommendation 5:

> All education personnel within the corrections service must be provided with some training, both initial and ongoing in the principles and practices of adult education.

It is obvious that implementing the adult education principles (Knowles, 1980) in order to accommodate the needs of adult prisoners would require educators to present a delivery system which takes into account the wide range of individual differences in age, levels of prior experience, attitudes, interests, and learning styles of a group whose only common denominator is serving time (McCollum, 1973). The adult education principles are based primarily on recognizing and attempting to cater to individual adult differences.

In order to accommodate the needs of the adult prisoner it is necessary for educators, penologists and society to understand that education of prisoners must be "adultized". As MacCormick (1932) suggests, prisoners are adults, with adult interests, concepts, and experiences. Prison education must be conceived as adult in the sense conveyed by the use of this term in the adult education movement. It must aim at the "enrichment of self" as well as at the imparting of utilitarian knowledge and skill.

Conclusion

By acknowledging the concept of adult education within prison education programs, a conscious, systematic effort is being made to cater to prisoner needs. Facilitating the adult prisoner needs through learning or skills acquisition is an encouraging step in allowing the prisoner to successfully return and function within society.

Education in prisons has proven to develop prisoner work skills, enhance prisoner self-respect and stimulate prisoner thoughts regarding their futures in the community, as opposed to returning to criminal behaviour. However educational programs within prison aligned to academic, vocational and remedial areas could be more successful and beneficial to prisoners and society if the concepts of adult education were adopted.

The benefits for the prisoner are personal in nature, being aligned to the development of self-esteem, self-concept and confidence building. The society benefits fiscally, in that education can perhaps decrease recidivism and encourages the prisoner to seek interests or pursuits free of criminal activity.

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